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TAGS: PARM PREL MARR PGOV KS

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ROH ON WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL BY
2010-11

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) President Roh held an exclusive two-hour interview with state run news agency Yonhap at the Blue House on August 9, expressing his confidence in South Korea's defense capabilities. He said that "the ROK military is ready even immediately" to conduct independent wartime operational control (OPCON). Roh said OPCON will "eventually happen in 2010 or 2011," at about the same time U.S. forces relocate to Pyongtaek. Roh described OPCON as the core of national defense and sovereignty, reaffirming his emphasis on "self-reliant" policies. Roh also made several references to lack of respect by the U.S. toward the ROK, stating that "it's about time that U.S. respects South Korea as an independent nation" and asking whether the public wants a "yes-man" as their President when dealing with the U.S. Roh also viewed ROK's sole control of OPCON as means to initiate military talks with North Korea "to ease tension and build up military confidence measures on the peninsula." He downplayed fears that the wartime OPCON transfer would lead to further reduction of U.S. troops and underscored continued U.S. military commitment in the future.

¶2. (C) In his meeting with the Ambassador on August 10, National Security Advisor Song Min-Soon told the Ambassador that he was quite disturbed by divisions in domestic political circles, making OPCON into a highly charged issue. Song stated that the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) is exaggerating and giving a false impression that a change in command relations would involve a substantial reduction of U.S. troops in South Korea, some even speculating a complete withdrawal. END SUMMARY.

AUGUST 9 INTERVIEW -- BLUE HOUSE VS. DEFENSE

¶3. (SBU) The August 9 Roh interview also highlighted differences between the Blue House and Ministry of Defense (MND). According to MND officials, no modifications have been made from their previous position that the ROK military will not be ready before 2012.

¶4. (U) Reactions to the interview are sharply divided within the National Assembly (NA). GNP members criticized Roh's remarks as exposing his ignorance and irresponsibility for national security and vowed to hold hearings at the NA National Defense Committee. GNP Chair Kang Jae-Sup questioned Roh's political motives and supported an "all-out inspection" through policy hearings. GNP Foreign Relations

Committee Chair Hwang Jin-ha stated that proper preparation is more important than timing, noting that it is "impossible" for South Korea to win, or deter, a war with only South Korean capabilities.

¶5. (U) Ruling party lawmakers were largely supportive. Former Chair of the National Defense Committee Chang Yong-Dal described the proposed 2010-2011 OPCON transfer as "very reasonable." Deputy Chairman of the National Defense Committee Im Jong-Seok argued that the conservatives (GNP) should have more confidence in the ROK military.

OPCON MUCH DISCUSSED LATELY

¶6. (U) President Roh's interview on OPCON transfer took place roughly a week after former Defense Ministers openly opposed the OPCON transfer. On August 2, thirteen former Defense Ministers met with current Defense Minister Yoon, urging him to relay their concerns about premature OPCON transfer to the Blue House. On August 3, Yoon responded publicly that ROK will be ready to conduct independent wartime OPCON after ¶2012. The former ministers took the announcement as a dismissal of their concerns by the Roh administration.

TEXT OF AUGUST 9 INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT ROH

¶7. (U) Complete text of President Roh's remarks (six pages) e-mailed to EAP/K.

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The transfer of wartime OPCON has become a deeply divisive political issue in South Korea. Both President Roh and the opposition GNP are fanning the flame. President Roh continues to frame the OPCON transfer as "self-reliance" and "independence" issue, which inevitably invites charges from the conservative GNP that he is being irresponsible, putting the U.S.- ROK alliance and the nation's security at risk. The GNP allegations have struck a chord especially among the traditional alliance supporters who are well aware of the difficulties USFK has had in resolving a number of high-profile management and operational issues: environmental remediation and operational issues, access to training ranges for USFK fighter pilots; and SMA burden sharing.

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